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Education of an Architect: Through African-American Constructions

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I could not conjure my God in this place, and it seemed His failure. Surprise... overwhelmed me.

Lorene Cary, *Black Ice*

Since the time I entered architecture school a simple question has worked, first my sub-consciousness and soon my consciousness. Where am 'I' in this thing called architecture? It is probably a small question for many something that enters the thoughts of most students for brief moments, but quickly passes, never to become world shattering. Possibly because many of these students come to see themselves within their heroes, icons, and mentors, through the history that is taught and the theories and methods that are espoused and implemented, they find validation in merely 'doing', following the plan. But as an African-American growing in self-awareness but not in presence I began to feel strangely less as each day within my curriculum passed. I had come to a place (architecture) where 'I' (an African-American) was and is virtually non-existent as a culture. This seeming impasse greatly affected my work and me. Although most architecture programs present architecture through some level of abstract processing, those processes are not without cultural linkages and some expected cultural outcomes based upon the instructor's and the institution's self referential knowledge. As the above quote poetically expresses, I found my self overwhelmed by the notion of me not belonging. The projects didn't speak to me, and even with brief moments of clarity, when a slight connection presented its self to me; my guides, the translators (the instructors) did not and possibly could not understand, from where I was coming and due to my inexperience, I couldn't understand either. So I struggle(d), greatly, to conjure my God, to find myself within architecture, collecting small disparate shards of ideas and material culture that don't all come together, but offer a way, a passage. Presented here are a few pieces of what I believe can be connective material that starts a process of re-educating myself and educating others with an awareness of 'self' fused into an introduction of architecture to both African-American and Non-African American students. These projects are by no means isolated within African-American tradition but are probably more akin to the hybridization of ideas, such as Negro Spirituals as developed by the turn of the 20th century, Fisk Jubilee singers, blues, jazz and a host of other American developments that find their origins strongly based within the black resistance to complete cultural assimilation and erasure.

This presentation documents and positions a series of projects, developed over a three year period (1997-2000), while

teaching the first year design curriculum at Hampton University department of architecture, one of seven Historically Black Colleges and Universities offering an accredited architecture degree. Included with the assumed objective of introducing the students to design fundamentals and basic representational skills (drawing) and modeling, these projects were also developed to incorporate approaches informed by African-American/ Black culture and experiences. Each project utilized one of four different analogues to develop the students abstract conceptualizing and compositional abilities: 1) Hand Jive Spatial, addresses architecture through body and gestural movement. This project conceptually draws upon the African-American traditions of making music between the hands and the body, and multiple grips and catches in the "simple" hand shake, translating there ideas of minimal means to communicate and create sound to minimal means to create form and define space. 2) Poetry project: language and syntax, analyzes poetry, of any type and of the student's choosing, including rap. The literary compositions are filtered through such lenses as: their rhyme scheme, rhythm, word count, meaning, mood interpretation and a host of other criteria. The entire project breaks down the compositions, recomposing them visually. 3) Strip Compositions: weaving/ sewing draws upon an African strip weaving tradition, kente cloth, as a reservoir of inspiration, of process and method. 4) African-American Constructions: a reading of *Mama Day*, a book by African-American author Gloria Naylor, story telling / narrative, draws on specific technical devices within the story that are particular to African American traditions in story telling as devices to develop space. Each project is intended to be comprehensive within the framework of the class, never completely isolating one aspect of the curriculum over the other: conceptualization, freehand drawing, technical drawing, critical thinking and modeling of conceptualization through various media. The four analogues were chosen because of their "apparent" nurtured embeddedness within aspects of the black cultural ethos, yet their "immediate distance" within the students ability to readily relate these approaches to architectural design. This play between familiarity and strangeness creates an instant dialogue within most students generating questions, which seek answers.

The pedagogical approach to the studio evolved from a loose interpretation of the first year design component in the Hampton University Department of Architecture curriculum and a desire to infuse a methodology that would allow students to develop their own identity through architecture.

Although students are accepted into the architecture program without a portfolio, it does not currently include what many other programs of this nature call a design fundamentals year, a course that teaches basic 2D and 3D composition and theory. Nor does it include a drawing class. The students take two courses within the department of architecture: ARC 101 (Design Studio) a 6 credit hour course and Arc 113 (Introduction to Architecture) a 1 credit hour lecture. Initially when this curriculum was implemented ARC 101 was no more than a glorified drafting course. This approach meshed well with the rest of the Departments extremely pragmatic and functionalist curriculum. Through out the early to mid nineties the first year saw a series of faculty who sought to slightly alter this approach to design and introduce small design problems based in "Order and Space". Through the incessant use of its pedagogy and main tactic of giving beginning design students "a kit of parts", the students generated provocative abstract spatial compositions based upon a predicted set of outcomes and basic drafting skills but not a strong ability to conceptualize and synthesize ideas into architectural space. These factors along with no freehand drawing class within the first year were two factors that the faculty found to be extremely problematic in not only the first year students but also within the upper division work as well. The first year studio had to be a "meta-course" one that could encompass the basic skill building, composition and critical thinking skills, all of which were deemed equally necessary. The general structure, of the first year studio evolved into a three part set of goals; observation, interpretation, and transformation. My personal emphasis in the class was placed on critical thinking, craft and skill building.

Cultivating cultural diversity and self-identification within the processes of the beginning design student was also a primary component within the mix of the new provisional curriculum amendments. Each of the works presented, except for the strip composition project, evolved from what I have termed an "improvisational studio". They were developed as a direct response to observations, interactions and conversations with the students in the class. Even the strip composition project, which was born out of work done within my own graduate thesis work, transformed as a result of contextual campus politics. So, many of the project descriptions were initially given orally, responding to local and cultural events. Initially I was quite uncomfortable with this improvisational method, but later found it to be quite useful in teaching the students to listen with intensity and to enquire with intentions but not expectations. The studio itself as well as each individual project are like "Deluzian constructions", attempts to generate new paths and connections surrounding a question of identity and essence (aesthetics) in the art of building, in the process of transformation. Deluzian Constructions are works, that John Rajchman has said:

"where abstraction functions not through a self referential code but through informal diagram, not by emptying all contents but by releasing other spaces, mapping other territories, not by reducing sense but by multiplying it, densifying instead

of rarifying, lightening instead of purifying, complexifying rather than reducing... it is a question of constructing free spaces of unregulation, undetermined by any prior plan, which so loosen an arrangement as to allow for sensations of something new, other affects, other precepts. It is a question of an operative abstraction working within an incomplete "virtual" architecture always to be invented anew."

Through these loosely configured problems, that sit tangentially to other modes of study and investigation, the student is able to construct their own language (using the five elements of architecture point, line, plane, mass, space, as a safety net), at what ever depth of interest they can handle, continually exploring the essence of their desired objective, which is to articulate an idea, a story, a notion architectonically.

The African-American sub-theme that exists within each of the exercises attempts to inform and help the students cultivate aesthetic practices and principals from the cultural identity of the campus and of the studio itself. The African-American principles that are utilized are extracted from a number of, specific although not exclusive, cultural sources such as music, dance, literature and oratory and textile design. Some of these principles are poly-rhythmic composition, Break line composition, Distortion as a preferred technique for abstraction of such things as the human form and language, high contrast in color choice, a tendency towards asymmetry, isolation within composition as well as a tendency towards pluralistic/ multi-valent organization systems just to name a few.

Hand Jive- The slapping of hands against the body to produce a sonorous rhythmic pattern/ composition usually done while dancing or playing.

Hand Jive Spatial was used to transition the students from a four-week session whose primary emphasis was skill building and secondary emphasis was composition and design to a design focused portion of the semester. The project is introduced verbally as a freehand drawing exercise. The students were asked to define a volume with their hands and to document that volume through a series of architectural drawings that describe the nature of the space. This volume could be as well or loosely formed as desired and as large as desired. Most of the drawings document, very clearly, the form of the hands. At the end of the class the students are handed the design assignment, which asks them to model their volume in three manners: liner, planer and mass. The proceeding week, with the support of lectures and desk critiques, the student's investigations lead to studies that explore the tectonic relationship of structure(bone), surface(skin), mass(flesh) and space(void). As the studies evolve some students move into constructing composite tectonic compositions, while others find understanding through a their series of investigations. Each composition is to be documented in plan section and elevation, which is an area that again some students begin to explore the possibilities of their proposal through this new set of abstractions.

Poetry Readings is a project that is born out of the general population of the student's interest in highly structured spoken word. This observation was clarified

through a casual conversation, which became the subject of a full class discussion on Rap music, the Hip-Hop movement and the strong Oral / Story telling tradition within African Diasporic cultures. The project, which had been in the back of my mind as a method of form generation in my own work was introduced not as Rap but as poetry. Allowing the students to have a sense of control over the material in which they would become extremely intimate over the course of two weeks. The project description and hand out again being extremely simple and not cluttered with esoteric notions that were beyond the entering students interests and to some extent their grasp, many of the complex issues being addressed through group discussion and one on one conversation.

The Strip composition project and the reading of *Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor were actually integrated into one project that covered approximately 6 weeks at the end of the second semester of first year design studio. This longer more involved investigation evolved from a need to fall in line with a Hampton University campus wide tradition/policy known as the campus reading. Each year the university chooses a book to be read by the entire freshman class. This reading is then to be integrated into a lesson or a series of lessons within each of their courses. In the past the architecture department had not truly engaged in this tradition, but due to current campus politics it became a good ideal for the department to participate in at least one of its courses. First year design studio became the laboratory for this experiment. Having already established a schematic syllabus, which was flowing quite well, the task became how, was the story and its references going to be integrated into the curriculum of the studio. After much thought a project that dealt with techtonics as its main focus (the strip composition project) became the framework on which the narrative would hang.

The project was introduced to the students approximately one week after the beginning of the campus reading of *Mama Day*. Through a long discussion about the story and some of the literary and creative mechanisms found within the text to help the students understand how this process can be understood as an extended version of the poetry readings done in the previous semester. A project description was handed out that paraphrased that lecture/ discussion and explained what they were to do with this information.

This final project, *Mama Day* was presented during a NAAB Accreditation visit, which included observers from China. Some of who sat on this review. After the presentations the question was raised by one of the observers. "Do you (the faculty) feel that some of the first year work is too conceptually complex?" The answer to such a question is yes and no. Yes, the work is extremely conceptually loaded, but no it is not more than the students can handle. Although these projects do not have large prescribed introductions based in established philosophical texts, they are not one liners. They are done in a manner, which seeks to completely immerse the student into the practice of rigorous critical thinking and critical translation. Teaching the students how to learn and think

architecturally, not confining them to preconceived notions of what one is. Since each exercise had an open range of difficulty, they became ideal for dealing with students that had various levels of development. In this way each project and studio became much like a vertical studio or a one room school house.

The evaluation of these projects by the overall school faculty found that while the projects were ended at an extremely abstract point in development, they, the faculty, could see the strengths the students had gained. They were extremely engaged in their work. They exuded a confidence in the ability to do anything. Each individual understood with great clarity and detail the conceptual content of their work. Also, because of the complexity and challenging nature of the compositions the students had to push themselves in the realm of aggressive descriptive geometry and material craft and usage.